

Crooks House
285 West G Street
Benicia
Solano County
California

HABS No. CA-2081

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CROOKS HOUSE

HABS No. CA-2081

Location:

285 West G Street, Benicia, Solano County,
California.

USGS Benicia Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 10.573610.4211695.

Present Owner:

Crooks Mansion Partnership, P.O. Box 866,
Benicia, California 94510

Present Use:

Vacant. Undergoing renovation.

Significance:

This Eastlake-influenced house, superbly sited on the Carquinez Stratts, was one of the most ambitious houses of Benicia. It was the home of the Crooks family for several generations and has been changed very little over the years.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Probably late 1880s. This property is not visible on the 1885 bird's-eye view of Benicia. It is, however, indicated on the 1891 Sanborn map of the city. A late 1880s date also accords with the estimated age given in the 1919 assessment records where the house was recorded as 35 years old, dating it to the mid-1880s.
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: This house is located on lots 9 and 13 of block 21 in the original plat of Benicia. The following references are found in the Solano County deed records:

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|------|--|
| 1883 | Book 87, pp. 53 and 55, Sept. 20, 1883 Heirs of Henrietta Nancy P. Smith to J. Crooks |
| 1970 | Book 1631, p. 565, Instrument Number 11497, June 29, 1970 Alice Crooks and Mabel Crooks Thompson to Antone L. and Zelinda Lopes |
| 1973 | Book 1854, p. 582, Instrument Number 23619, Sept. 9, 1973 Antone and Zelinda Lopes to the Crooks Mansion Partnership |

4. Original plans and construction: There are no original plans known.

In its main lines this is an extremely well-planned house. The servant area occupies the north portion of the structure. Through the center runs an east-west axis containing the main living and dining rooms. By means of sliding doors, these rooms can be closed off or opened into one another forming a large unified space. The front rooms, including the master bedroom and parlor, are admirably sited on the south of the building, with excellent views of the straits through large bay windows. On the exterior, the Eastlake detailing allows a concise articulation of the vertical wood structure, and the massing clearly reflects the interior dispositions of the house.

There are, however, several puzzling details. On the exterior, several of the parts, particularly the porches, make awkward junctions. The porch on the front of the house, for example, cuts across the top of the molding of one window, and the slope of the roof cuts diagonally across the molding of another. The corner post rests awkwardly against the wall of the building, and there appears to be no tie-in between house and porch. On the interior the transom in the hallway serving the side door is very cramped, and the trim is haphazardly applied. In the area of the stairway on the second floor, a large section housing closets is suspended into the stairwell, creating a clash between the rounded angle of the stairway and the angular corner of the overhanging block. This construction extends too far to be supported by the joists of the house and had to be suspended from the floor above the metal tie rods.

These very awkward features in a house otherwise so admirably designed at first appear to indicate later alterations. There is good evidence, however, that this is not true. Significantly, all of the details of construction are uniform throughout. There are two other explanations: it is possible that the awkward features are due to very hasty construction; an even more likely explanation is that the design was copied from a pattern book, with unfortunate changes made by the local builder.

5. Alterations and additions: Largely because it remained in the same family from the time of its building until 1970, this house has remained virtually intact although its condition has noticeably deteriorated.

Under the current owners, extensive renovation is being carried out. By the summer of 1976 the south elevation had been almost totally rebuilt. Most of the plaster had been pulled from the walls and ceilings throughout the house, except for the central molded plaster medallions and the heavy plaster cornices. On the first floor two closets adjoining the dining

room were converted to a bathroom, which will be lit by a new window. On the second floor several of the closets and partitions for closets and basins have been removed. The kitchen has been remodeled. The intention of the owners is to restore the building for use as offices and lodgings.

Two of the three outbuildings shown on the Sanborn maps of 1891, 1899, and 1913-1954 are no longer in place. The larger of these structures, apparently a carriage house, has been moved across the street and sits on the grounds of a house at 277 West H Street.

B. Historical Context:

This house was in the hands of the Crooks family from its construction until 1970. Although it was apparently built by J. E. Crooks, it passed fairly soon thereafter to his brother William L. Crooks. Local tradition hold that J. E. Crooks left Benicia suddenly after a shooting in which Bishop Wingfield's son was killed. William Crooks was a prominent local figure. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1863, he came to Benicia in 1880 as an operator for the Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1890 he started to work for the People's Bank in Benicia and eventually was made president. He sold the bank in 1920 to invest in real estate, eventually owning a large number of properties in Benicia. During much of this time Crooks was active in local politics. First elected mayor in 1898 and serving until 1918, he was reelected in 1924 and served until 1940. Crooks died in 1950. After his death his daughter, Alice Crooks, continued to live in the house. A retired school teacher, she lived a very reclusive life, and in later years little maintenance was done on the house.

Prepared by: Robert Bruegmann
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This residence represents one of the early remaining examples of an Eastlake-influenced style to be found in Benicia.

2. Condition of fabric: Fair, in process of being restored.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The house, approximately 50' by 60', has an irregular plan, a four-bay front, and two stories above a partial raised basement and an attic floor.
2. Foundation: Common bond red brick, with brick piers.
3. Walls: V-grooved wood siding, painted yellow with fish-scale shingles in the gables and under the eaves. There is a wide wooden band at each floor line, corner boards, watertable and sill band, all painted white. There is vertical wood siding under the sill band on the front portion of the house. Beaded wood vertical siding, painted yellow, is under the windows.
4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame structure.
5. Porches: There is a gabled roof over the stoop at the front door. Decorative brackets and large, turned wood columns supported the roof. The porch has a wood floor, beaded wood soffit and ceiling. A double opening framed with decorative wood and a lattice transom leads from the stoop to the shed-roofed porch on the south and east sides of the house. There were formerly doors on the opening. The porch is enclosed around the sill with wooden lattice, painted white. Decorative brackets extend in three directions from the turned columns.

Another porch on the east side of the house extends across the rear wing. There are four wooden steps and one concrete step leading up to the porch. The shed roof is supported by turned wood columns, and a half column at the wall. Wooden lattice encloses the sill of the porch.

6. Chimneys: There are two interior brick chimneys, one on the east gable end and one on the north gable end.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The principal entrance on the south is a double opening with wooden doors, decorative wood surrounds, wood threshold, and a transom window above that is boarded up.

There is a side door from the east porch leading into the rear stair hall. It is a wood panel door with transom above, wood surround, and wood threshold. A door from the kitchen is on the north facade, but is now closed up. It is a wood panel door with transom, wood surrounds and wood threshold.

- b. Windows and shutters: There are wooden, two-light casement windows in the basement that are boarded up with plywood. Wooden windows on the first, second and attic floors have two-over-one-light double-hung sashes. Decorative jambs form the trim on each side of the window and extend below the sill to the floor level, forming a panel below the window. There is a small pent hood over each window, supported by brackets. All trim is chamfered, painted white with chamfers painted red.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Hipped roof with intersecting gables, covered with asphalt shingles.
- b. Cornices, eaves: Elaborate chamfered brackets are under the boxed eaves. There is a barge board on the gable ends, scalloped along the bottom with a carved fan design on the face. Crown molding is at the eaves and the rake boards. There is a pent roof over the second-floor window of the south bay, supported by decorative chamfered brackets.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There is a raised basement under the north part of the house. It has a brick floor and houses a coal-fired steam boiler, coal bin and storage.
- b. First floor: The entry and stair hall are in the southeast corner, with the living room north of that. The parlor is in the southwest corner, with the dining room north of that. The north section is the service wing, containing kitchen, bathroom, and laundry room.
- c. Second floor: The second floor has essentially the same layout as the first floor, with five bedrooms and two baths.
- d. Attic: The back stair leads into a large room with a pair of windows on the north wall. There are three other rooms and an unfinished space in the attic.

- 2. Stairways: The main stairway is a half-turn with landings. The square balusters have a wood panel, with quatrefoil cut from the center, between each one, and supporting a simple wooden handrail.

The back stairway is an open string, wooden stair leading past the second floor to the attic floor. The stairwell opening at the attic floor is a solid rail of vertical wood siding. The simple wood handrail has spindle balusters.

The stair to the basement is an open string wood winder.

3. Flooring: Narrow board floors are in the entry hall, living room, dining room, parlor and back entry hall on the first floor. Wider board floors are in the remainder of the house.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Wood lath is exposed in the parlor, entry hall and on the second floor. Heavy plaster cornices and ceiling medallions are on the ceilings in the bedrooms, parlor and entry hall. Walls and ceilings in the dining room and living room are painted plaster. In both rooms there is a panel wood wainscot, with carving in each panel and a heavy molding at top of wainscot. There is a vertical wood panel wainscot in the rear entry hall. The second-floor bath, first-floor bath, kitchen and laundry have gypsum board walls and ceilings, painted. There is a plaster arch about one-half the distance in the second floor center hall. The attic rooms have vertical beaded-wood panel walls and ceilings.
5. Doorways and doors: Doors on the first and second floors are raised panel wood, painted with graining to simulate fine wood. Heavy wood surrounds have bull's-eye corner blocks and plinth blocks. Attic doors are wood panel. There are double sliding doors between living room and dining room and entry hall and parlor. A sliding door is between the entry hall and living room. There is a sliding door on the second floor between the front and rear stair halls, and between the east bedroom and dressing room. A swinging door is between the kitchen and hallway.
6. Decorative features: Heavy wood baseboards. Window trim has bull's-eye corner blocks. A wooden panel is below each window in the east bedroom. The plaster cornice in the living room and dining room has an egg and dart motif. The coal-burning fireplace in the living room has a tile surround and hearth, cast-iron cover and wood mantel. The coal-burning fireplace in the dining room has tile surround and hearth, wood mantel with mirror and shelves on each side supported by spindle columns. There is a spindle rail around the top. The wood surrounds and apron under the mantel have wood carvings. A cast-iron surround and grate are at the firebox. The projecting coal-burning fireplace in the second-floor east bedroom has tile surround and

hearth, a wood mantel and wood corner shelves on each side of the fireplace under the mantel. Where the wainscot meets the door jambs, there is a bull's-eye trim piece.

7. Notable hardware: The brass door hardware appears to be the original.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Gold-finished steam radiators are in the first-floor rooms and the second-floor bath. The original coal-fired steam boiler encased in brick is in the basement. An original coal-burning stove is in the kitchen. In the living room on the north wall are two cast-iron grills, one near the ceiling and one near the floor for outside air.
 - b. Lighting: There are later light fixtures hanging from the ceiling medallion in some rooms. There is a wall fixture in the corner of each side of the fireplace in the living room. Other lighting fixtures are modern.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house facing south to the Carquinez Straits sits on a lot that extends from West H Street to West G Street, on the southeast corner of the intersection of West H and West Third Streets. West G Street does not extend in front of the house, but rather the waterfront of the Carquinez Straits. Residential properties surround the site. There are numerous large trees surrounding the house. A white picket fence surrounds the site on the west and north sides. Two large palm trees are on either side of the front.
2. Outbuildings: There is a small storehouse to the north of the main house. It has wood siding, gable roof with asphalt shingles, a wood panel door, a window in each gable end and no floor. It is in fair condition. A very large cistern is near this building, but has been filled in.

Prepared by: John P. White
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
July, 1976

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: A set of plans of the house prepared for the Lopes family in 1970 by architect Paul Tyrrell of Vallejo includes the following:

First and second floor plans (HABS No. CA-2081-8).

Basement and third floor plans (HABS No. CA-2081-9).

West and south elevations (HABS No. CA-2081-10).

North and east elevations (HABS No. CA-2081-11).

B. Early Views:

Photograph of the house showing the water line, and the houses to the east. Stumm postcard, ca. 1908-1916, captioned "A Pretty Residence Spot at Benicia, Cal., Frank J. Stumm, Publisher, Benicia, Cal., No. 1917." Collection of the current owners. This view shows the Crooks house at the extreme left, next to a house that is now at 271 West G Street. In front of the house extends a wooden walkway partly supported by a trestle, a popular promenade for many years. There are a number of these postcards in private collections. (HABS No. CA-2081-6).

Photograph, with a message on the back from Crooks to the Hanlon family dated 1913, showing the house with its walkway from H Street in the snow. Collection of the current owners. (HABS No. CA-2081-7).

Three photographs by Minor White, 1948. California Historical Society, negs. 2431, 2890, and 2891. These photos are by one of California's most important photographers and are excellent prints.

C. Bibliography:

Assessment Book for the City of Benicia, 1919. City Clerk's Office, Benicia.

Gunn, Harry Lawrence, and Hunt, Marguerite. History of Solano County and Napa County, Vol. II, pp. 11-12. Chicago, 1927.

Madrone Associates. "Draft Environmental Impact Report on the Development of the Former Crooks property and residence, Benicia, California." Environmental Impact Statement, July, 1974. Mimeographed. Benicia Planning Dept. This contains some historical matter.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with Exxon Company, U.S.A. (a division of Exxon Corporation) and the Benicia Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of H.A.B.S., the project was completed during the summer of 1976 at the Historic American Buildings Survey Field Office, Benicia, California, by John P. White (Assistant Professor, Texas Tech University), Project Historian; Kenneth Payson (Cornell University), Architect; and student assistant architects Scott Barnard (University of Pennsylvania); James L. Cook (Texas Tech University); and Gary A. Statkus (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign). The written data were edited by Alison K. Hoagland in the HABS Washington office in January, 1981.